

Saving the next girl

JMU alumni help raise awareness on female abductions through Help Save the Next Girl

BY JAMES IRWIN ('06)

Creating the public service announcement was uplifting. And having it recognized with a national award was gratifying. But for **Bruce Bryan ('87)** and **Brett Winter Lemon ('06)**, what mattered most was the cause.

The PSA for Help Save The Next Girl, a not-for-profit organization focused on promoting personal safety, recently won a 2013 Silver Telly Award, and has launched a massive public awareness campaign about crimes against young women. Bryan, Lemon and a dedicated team of creative professionals in Roanoke, Va., have worked on media for the organization for two years, attempting to create a message of empowerment out of a brutal crime that rocked their community.

A crime, and a cause

Morgan Harrington's story has been widely chronicled. On Oct. 17, 2009, the 20-year-old Virginia Tech student attended a Metallica concert in Charlottesville. She was abducted and murdered, her body found 101 days later in a remote pasture six miles from the concert venue. The case remains unsolved.

Nineteen months after her abduction, Harrington was awarded a posthumous degree by Virginia Tech. Bryan, an advertising professional, and his public relations partner Stephanie Koehler – who assisted the Harringtons after Morgan's abduction – attended this small ceremony.

"I remember sitting there and thinking, 'There are people who may know something who aren't news viewers,'" Bryan says. "The idea came to use advertising to get the word out, in hopes of solving the murder, and to help save the next girl."

That phrase was one Gil and Dan Harrington had used often since their daughter's abduction. Amidst their grief, they founded Help Save The Next Girl, hoping to raise the level of dialogue about crimes against women.

"The terminology [can be] so passive: Missing, what does that even mean?" Gil Harrington says. "My reading glasses are missing because I wasn't paying attention. [But] none of us left our daughters; they were abducted, they were stolen.

"They were robbed from us."

Bryan had an idea to build attention-getting ads around Gil Harrington's stark message. The former TV sales manager approached local media and proposed they run PSAs on their unused ad space. Not a single outlet turned him down.

"Everyone knew the story," Bryan recalls. "Everyone wanted to help."

Web advertising spread throughout the state, in Richmond, Charlottesville, Roanoke, Harrisonburg and Lynchburg. Bryan and Koehler pieced together a creative team to produce rich media. They brought in creative director Chris Henson and post-production specialist Kirk Wray. They also reached out to Jane Vance (Morgan's former art professor) and Laura Schneider, president of the Virginia Tech chapter of Help Save The Next Girl. And they enlisted Lemon, a SMAD graduate who grew up next door to the Harringtons, to serve as director of photography.

"We wanted the footage to speak for itself, to be strong and emotional," Lemon says of the video. "We all wanted it to revolve around young girls, and the idea that they had to look out for each other."

Raising awareness

Bryan estimates the campaign has around 2 million Web impressions in a little more than a year, a testament, he says, to professionals doing what they do best to help the community. That idea is something he and Lemon both say they experienced as Madison students.

"My involvement and experience [at JMU] made this a natural thing," Bryan says.

There are still abductions. This is an uphill fight, to remove the variables of violence against women before they conspire to occur, to prevent everything that can go wrong from going wrong. But it also is a fight of solidarity. The final frame of the PSA shows 13 young women, ranging in age from sixth graders to college students, standing atop a small ridge, hands clasped, their outlines backlit by the evening sun.

"Everything unfolded perfectly; right people, right day, the weather was amazing, the light was perfect," Lemon says. "It doesn't ever happen that way. This was a case where something magical was happening."

The group hopes that magic has a lasting effect. After all, that's the point of Help Save The Next Girl – that because of the work of Dan and Gil Harrington, Stephanie Koehler and Jane Vance, Chris Henson, Laura Schneider and Kirk Wray, and JMU alumni Bruce Bryan and Brett Lemon, girls and young women in danger of abduction can prevent it from happening; that they avoid the danger; that they are aware, protected. Safe. **M**



Brett Lemon ('06) and Bruce Bryan ('87) created bracelets and T-shirts to promote the Help Save The Next Girl campaign.